

Amendment would offer abuse victims housing aid

By JILL BODACH
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REGION — Affordable housing and domestic violence are not often linked together but advocates of domestic violence victims will say that the two are more than related — they are intertwined.

U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, R-4, recognized that and recently offered an amendment to bill H.R. 5443, the Section 8 Voucher Reform Act, which authorizes Section 8 funds to be used to provide emergency vouchers to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault or stalking. The amendment passed the Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity last week.

When a domestic violence victim leaves her home she can usually find temporary shelter but long-term housing is often difficult.

"When a woman comes into shelter here in Connecticut they are allowed 60-day stay, which is a very short term and when that time is up there are very, very few options for housing here," said Kathieen Healy, co-director of client services for the Domestic Violence Crisis Center. "In fact, there are no options in Fairfield County and very few options in Connecticut."

For a woman who does not have the access to assets she might have had in the past when she was with her spouse or significant other finding affordable housing is difficult. The amendment will address that.

"There is going to be clarifying language in the amendment that will allow a woman to apply for Section 8 assistance if she qualifies

See SHAYS', A4

Shays' amendment would offer Section 8 aid to abuse victims

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income wise even if she wasn't previously using Section 8," Shays said.

Finding financial assistance to provide her and her children with housing is not as easy as it may seem. And, for a domestic violence victim, a long wait is not an option.

"Just to get on a Section 8 waiting list there is a lottery and that is only done periodically," Healy said. "I don't think there has been access to a waiting list in Stamford for two years and I can't remember the last time there was access in Norwalk. Even if you get on the waiting list we're talking about a two-year wait on average, if you're lucky, to get a voucher."

The amendment will also allow a woman living in a public housing complex who is being harassed to be moved to another complex where she will be safer through use of a voucher.

"A victim of domestic abuse may need to ask a public housing authority manager to help her find a new, safe place to live," Shays said. "How is she supposed to react now when they tell her they'll move her from Apartment 102 to Apartment 301 in the same building? This amendment is a common sense approach that allows housing authorities to give victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault or stalking an emergency Section 8 voucher so she can move to a safer location."

Last week, Shays also wrote a letter to Frank R. Wolf, chairman of the subcommittee on science, state, justice and commerce appropriations to ask for full funding — \$680 million — for the Violence Against

Women Act programs for Fiscal year 2007.

This funding is necessary, Healy said, because many of the programs were approved in 2005 when the VAWA programs were signed into law by President Bush there was no funding provided for them.

"There is no funding for each of the new programs and the current programs get cut to one degree or another, usually an average of 50 percent," Healy said. "It's hugely important that Congressman Shays is putting his support behind this because without funding these programs are going to suffer tremendously."

For Shays, this is an issue whose importance has grown the more he has learned about it.

In Connecticut, there are 18 domestic violence shelters and victim service programs and over 13 sexual assault crisis programs serving victims from VAWA programs. Since communities are constantly trying to improve their response to victims needs, the need continues to rise.

"You really don't understand the full importance of these programs until you've sat down and talked with a beautiful, capable woman who is broken because she has been told by someone that she is not beautiful or capable," Shays said. "I always say that my role as a legislator is to listen, learn, help and lead. It's very satisfying to me to be a part of supporting funding of domestic violence programs because there is a need. I've heard the need, I've learned about it and now I'm trying to help."

A decision on the VAWA funding is expected within the next month.